



A review of  
**Angela Carter  
and Decadence:  
Critical Fictions/  
Fictional Critiques**

**Martine Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère**

**M**aggie Tonkin's *Angela Carter and Decadence* makes a significant contribution to 'second-wave' Carter criticism twenty years after the writer's untimely death. The study takes us through a portrait gallery of runaway mechanical dolls, disgruntled muses, rebellious *femmes fatales* and elusive transgender Eves. It focuses on Decadence (or is it Decadentism?) as a movement in the arts that constituted a major source of ideas and images in Carter's fiction, and sheds new light on the debated question of the author's feminism. Tonkin accounts for critical hostility against Carter in the 1980s as a manifestation of 'aesthetic Puritanism' (6) that tended to equate progress and morality with a simple, unadorned, unselfconscious style inimical to the writer's enthusiastic embrace of mannerism, and her dismantling of archetypes of femininity associated with the *fin-de-siècle*.

Obviously, Tonkin is not the first to try to reconcile Carter's treatment of fetishised representations of women with the author's professed feminist standpoint, but her detour through Decadence as theme *and* style ('pathology of the detail', to quote Shor, 4-5) is original and convincing, as it boldly places aesthetics – i.e. (inter)textual strategies – at the heart of the discussion. Focusing on Carter's postmodern poetics of citation, Tonkin shows how her fiction articulates 'a critique of the misogynistic aspects of literary Decadence' (15) through complex forms of enunciation and address, feminist irony, and selfconscious manipulation of decadent female stereotypes with a vengeance.

What is more, as the subtitle of Tonkin's book suggests, Carter not only responds to her main sources, but also to their cultural, literary and critical reception. She considered fiction as 'a kind of elaborate form of literary criticism' (24), and so each text functions as 'a metacommentary on both its intertext[s] and the critical traditions that have determined [its] reception' (79), as Tonkin demonstrates through illuminating parallel readings. The book begins

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with an analysis of Carter's early novel *The Magic Toyshop* (1967) as a response to the figure of Olympia, the living doll in E.T.A. Hoffmann's 'The Sandman', itself mediated through Freud's 1919 essay 'The Uncanny'. Carter's invocation of the muse allegedly killed by feminism is pursued in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972) through the ambiguous figure of Albertine in Marcel Proust's *La Recherche*. In a chapter suggestively titled 'The "Poetics" of Decomposition', 'The Cabinet of Edgar Allen Poe' is revisited through Marie Bonaparte's theorising of the dead mother as muse. 'Musing on Baudelaire' shows how 'Black Venus' re-historicises the poet's creole mistress, against Baudelaire's proclamation of woman as the opposite of the Dandy (allegedly because she is 'natural' and hence 'abominable'). Reversing the gender roles assigned by the French poet, Carter remakes him into her own diseased muse, though she is inevitably contaminated by his syphilitic style. Chapter 7 accounts for Carter's interest in the late 19th-century obsession with the *femme fatale* as an ambivalent cultural trope crystallising misogynistic anxieties but also expressing resistance against patriarchal norms, as in the work of the French Decadent woman writer Rachilde, whose novel *La Marquise de Sade* (1887) sought to reclaim Sade for feminism/the New Woman. A chapter on *The Sadeian Woman* (1979) logically follows, which situates the polemical (and already much commented on) essay in the context of feminist debates and delineates Carter's anti-essentialist stance. The last chapter anatomises the transformations and rehabilitation of the ultimate female archetype, Eve or Lilith/Leilah in *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), in the context of turn-of-the-century culture.

Tonkin's informed, detailed and subtle readings of selected works by Carter in light of their intertextual sources testify to the role and importance of Decadence in the writer's 'demythologizing' project. The study also carefully documents the author's ironic deployment of tropes of femininity as well as her response to the cultural debates surrounding them. Because Tonkin herself suggests that intertextuality in Carter's fiction extends well beyond the confines of literature, she could have explored these cultural ramifications even more fully. Although passing references are made to ballet and cinema, the analysis could be extended to the impact of Decadent visual art/iconography on Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, for example. Also, a discussion of the term 'Decadence' could have been helpful, since it is not a self-evident critical concept. Overall, however, the book explores a relatively neglected area in Carter criticism, considers a wide range of literary and non-literary sources, and makes a strong case for a reconsideration – and reconciliation – of the author's poetics and politics.

Author: Maggie Tonkin.

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